

# *natural* HEALING

Sourced from nature and credited with a host of positive qualities that range from anti-ageing to anti-inflammatory, argan oil is rapidly growing in popularity. However, not all products on the market are the genuine article

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**W**ith results-driven being the industry word of the moment and both spas and consumers increasingly looking for products that deliver and for evidence of how they do it, it is perhaps not surprising that argan oil has exploded onto the global skincare market in the last two years. A completely natural product when undiluted, argan oil is derived from the fruit of the argan tree, which grows only in southwestern Morocco, and said to possess anti-ageing, anti-inflammatory, hydrating, restorative, skin smoothing and protective properties.

While used on hair and skin by Morocco's Berber people for centuries, it is a relatively new discovery for most international markets, with research company Datamonitor reporting that the number of cosmetic products featuring argan oil in the US personal care market rose from just two in 2007, to 111 in 2011.



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## Rising star

“The awareness of argan oil has grown and grown, says Denise Leicester, founder of organic skincare and spa treatment brand Ila – which uses argan oil in many of its products and treatments – of the recent surge in the oil's popularity. “When we started out in 2007, people were very unaware of argan oil, but now they're wanting it and asking for it,” she says. Family-run organic skincare label Essence of Morocco has similarly found that knowledge of the product has increased dramatically in the past few years. “Essence of Morocco was set up in 2010, at a time when few people knew of argan oil and we [frequently] had to explain what it is,” says Souad Alaoui, the founder of the London-based business, adding that it has, however, “become much more popular in the past few years.”

Edwige Aboudaram, managing director of Figae Distribution – the UK distributor for French cosmetics brand Kaé Argatherapy, which uses argan oil as the base across its range – believes product launches by some of the world's biggest consumer brands have played a part in raising argan oil's

international profile. “Well-known brands like L'Oréal have launched products with argan oil and I think that has something to do with people becoming more and more aware of it,” she comments. However, she adds that while “a lot of people have heard of argan oil, they're not really educated about it, they're not aware of the benefits.”

This is reinforced by Emmanuel Akintunde, director of Jilali Argan Oil UK, since May the UK distributor for the Morocco-based company of the same name. Akintunde says that while “there is definitely a hype about argan oil at the moment, many people don't actually know what the benefits are.” To address this, all Jilali products come with a leaflet detailing the benefits of argan oil, and instructions on how to apply it.

## Argan oil abilities

So what are the benefits of this suddenly much-talked about oil? As it turns out, many. A multi-use product that can be applied to hair, skin and nails alike, it contains a high concentration of the moisturising, antioxidant and free-radical-fighting vitamin E. The presence of fatty acids such as omega 3, 6 and 9 are said to contribute to keeping the skin hydrated, boost elasticity and combat fine lines and wrinkles by restoring the skin's hydro lipid layer. The triterpenoid saponins in the oil are believed to have a skin-softening effect and to possess healing qualities that make it ideal for treating scars and repairing sunburnt skin.





Meanwhile, the combination of plant oils it contains, schottenol and spinasterol, gives argan oil anti-inflammatory properties that are reported to help soothe irritated skin, including eczema, psoriasis and acne. Balancing the natural pH levels in the skin it can, contrary to what is widely believed of oils, also be applied to combination and oily skin. “Argan oil is a dry, non-greasy, oil that helps bring balance to the skin and allows it to restore itself, which means it works as well on greasy skin as it does on dry,” Leicester explains. However, while those who sell and distribute argan oil are naturally keen to get the word out and highlight its benefits, there is real concern that companies attempting to jump on the argan oil bandwagon are passing imitation products off as the real thing.

### False findings

“The market is inundated with products that claim to be argan oil but that in fact only contain a very small percentage of argan oil, mixed with chemicals,” Alaoui explains. The lack of regulation of the naturals market means businesses are free to promote something as an argan oil product even if it features only a minute amount of the substance, leaving it to spas and consumers to be vigilant in separating the real argan oil from the diluted version. “You need to be very careful because it’s very easy to cut argan oil with corn oil, for example, and you wouldn’t know the difference – except that you won’t get the same results,” Leicester says.

“Unfortunately, many people have been sold the fake argan oil, which doesn’t make much of a difference to your skin and gives argan oil a bad name,” says Eylem Govtepe, who set up Rana Argan Oil with her partner Neil Rogers in the UK in January this year, selling pure argan oil. There are, however, a number of ways to distinguish the pure argan oil from the diluted, with Leicester recommending spas to ask questions. “Ask your suppliers where they source their argan oil from; ask them whether or not they obtain it directly from the suppliers and ask to see their certification,” she says, explaining that Ila sources all its

argan oil from a farmer the brand has worked with for many years.



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ARGAN OIL

PRODUCT FOCUS

### Knowing the signs

“If you’re choosing argan oil for your spa for the specific qualities it possesses, you really want to make sure that you’re getting the real thing,” Leicester continues. Aboudaram – who explains that while Kaé Argatherapy does blend its argan with other ingredients, including algae and monoi oil, all company products retain a 45-65% argan oil base – advises spas “who are looking for efficient high quality products,” to test the oil by applying it. “If it doesn’t penetrate your skin in a few minutes, it’s not a good quality argan oil,” she says. Govtepe similarly comments that “real argan oil should absorb into your skin very quickly, it shouldn’t stay oily on your skin.”

Another sign that you are handling pure argan oil is the scent. Extracted from kernels contained within the nuts inside the fruit of the argan tree, undiluted argan oil has a very distinctive aroma. “Real argan oil should have a light nutty smell to it, but many companies dilute the oil to take the smell away,” Govtepe says. Alaoui adds that at Essence of Morocco they “do not deodorise our oils as this would mean using chemical solvents that would destroy the nutritional benefits of the oil.”

Both spas and consumers are also warned to be suspicious if products labelled as argan oil are sold at a very



low price. “It’s an expensive product that takes a long time to make, so if someone is selling it very cheaply, it’s definitely fake,” Govtepe says, with Leicester explaining that the reason for the high cost is the amount of argan fruit required to produce the oil. “It takes a lot of argan berries to yield the oil, unlike almonds, for example, which yield a lot of oil. This makes argan oil more precious,” she says.



### FAST FACTS

- o As a dry oil, argan oil absorbs quickly into the skin
- o Argan oil can also be used on the hair, contributing to thicker, shinier and more lustrous hair, and to strengthen nails
- o The oil is said to be effective on stretchmarks and to help counteract skin redness and blemishes
- o The product works just as well on men’s skin as it does on women’s
- o The argan tree grows only in southwestern Morocco, but trials are currently under way to see if it can grow in other parts of the country



## Making a social difference

Argan oil is still largely produced in the traditional way, with the fruit hand-picked by women and left to dry in the Moroccan sun, before the exterior shell of the fruit is removed to get to the hard nut inside it. The nuts are cracked by hand by the women in order to extract the kernels, which are then ground into a paste and pressed - using machines - to produce the oil. With between two and three million people in impoverished rural areas depending on the argan forests, now a Unesco Biosphere Reserve known as the Arganeraie, for their livelihood, there is also an important socioeconomic component to the production of the oil. The argan fruit is traditionally picked and shelled by women and as many as 50 argan-producing women's cooperatives are currently in operation in Morocco.



Ila, Kaé Argatherapie, Rana Argan Oil, Essence of Morocco and Jilali Argan Oil UK all work with women's cooperatives and Leicester explains that for Ila, "the effect the production process has on the local community," is key to the company ethos. "The woman at the head of the cooperative we work with wanted to create a business that supports women by allowing them to work at home, so they can still look after their children," she says. Consequently, all shelling is done in the home, rather than in a factory. Akintunde similarly comments that, for Jilali Argan Oil UK, it is an important factor that they "work with a women's cooperative that helps improve living conditions for women in Morocco."

A natural product credited with highly beneficial qualities and with a positive social and economic impact to boot, it's little wonder both professional and consumer markets are waking up to the appeal of argan oil. 🌿

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